

IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

'Sidekick' utility package a toy for programmers, gadget freaks

Programmers using IBM PCs and PC-compatible computers have a new program to toy with. It's called "desk-top utilities." And its best known and most successful exponent is Sidekick published by Borland International. It lists for \$54.95 and is available at most computer stores.

The big question for businesses with personal computers is whether people other than programmers — managers, secretaries, accountants and general office workers — also would benefit from using the program.

If your job entails sitting in front of a computer all day, you might find a program such as Sidekick useful in certain situations.

Sidekick is a hodgepodge of smaller programs that can be loaded into memory and simply "called up" when you need them. They don't disturb the application program — word processing, accounting or the like — currently being operated by your computer. Instead, a window appears on your screen with the appropriate information whenever you please. The key combination "Ctrl" "Alt" pressed simultaneously brings up the main menu, and then the following keys load the individual functions of Sidekick:

✓ "N" for Note Pad. Let's say you are in the middle of your accounting program and you need to make some notes describing a complicated transaction. This feature allows you to type your notes for future reference. You can easily create many notes on the fly without bothering to create documents in your word processing program. My evaluation: only marginally useful.

✓ "C" for Calculator. At the touch of a key, a calculator pops up on your screen, with all the functions of a small electronic calculator. It's handy if you need to do frequent calculations while you're in the middle of other programs. Evaluation: I found my \$10 hand calculator easier to use

would still be lost in the event of a power problem. Either way, it's too risky for me.

✓ "D" for Dialer. Assuming your computer has a modem that's attached to your telephone line, telephone numbers can be dialed automatically. The program does one thing that's not typically available with computer-based communication programs: It will dial any number shown on the computer screen, even if you are in the middle of another program. When viewing a client account in your database program, for example, the number shown could be dialed by



Hillel Segal

Sidekick. Evaluation: for a telephone marketing person, this could be a very valuable and time-saving feature. It could be similarly helpful for secretaries who repeatedly dial calls for executives.

✓ "A" for ASCII table. This is a reference table for programmers, showing the 256-character set in decimal and hexadecimal. Evaluation: pure gobbledegook and useless for non-programmers.

Borland International, the company that publishes the program, has been so successful with Sidekick that it recently introduced another related product called "Traveling Sidekick," with a list price of \$69.95.

The traveling version includes a handsome binder that is intended for people to take with them everywhere they go, with sections similar to most appointment books. It adds the capability to print out appointment calendars, telephone directories, and name and address listings in formats that can be inserted in the binder.

From a functional viewpoint, despite the beautiful presentation of the traveling version, I found it less useful than the regular version. Instead of aiming at the whimsical, sometimes playful needs of programmers, this version of the program is strictly for executives who have the luxury of a computer-wise secretary

✓ L for Calendar. Anytime you wish, this month's calendar appears in the window, with the current day highlighted. By hitting the return key, an appointment schedule appears, ready for you to fill in today's appointments or tasks. With ease, appointments can be added for other days in the future, and separate schedules can be made for different people. This might be convenient for a secretary who schedules appointments for several executives. Evaluation: while easy to use, it has a fatal flaw — if the lights flicker while the computer is being used, your memory would be wiped out, along with your entire appointment log. Some programs that compete with Sidekick allow the schedules to be saved on your computer's disk, but entries added between saves

who could give them priorities of their upcoming appointments.

The question we started with, which is still relevant, is whether the regular version of Sidekick could be useful for non-programmers in a business environment. The answer depends on how much you use your computer and how many telephone calls you make.

ADVICE: In total, I found that all the features of the regular version of Sidekick could have a value that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is occasionally useful as a note pad, not really helpful as an online calculator, risky as an appointment calendar, and potentially *very valuable* as a dialer — depending upon the needs of the individual. If you are a gadget freak, you'll probably love it, regardless of the drawbacks.

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant and organizer of the Personal Computer Managers Association, P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.